

THE MILNER VERSION OF BRITISH MALAYAN HISTORY - A REJOINDER

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Pembahasan ini menerima bahawa setengah komen yang ditimbulkan oleh A.C. Milner (*Kajian*, Vol. IV, No 2) adalah membantu mahupun sah. Namun demikian, kritikan beliau terhadap kaedah-kaedah sejarah mengenai Semenanjung Malaya British sudahpun dikenali umum. Makalah ini menolak tesis am Milner bahawa sejarahwan Semenanjung Malaya British adalah terperangkap oleh dokumen-dokumen kolonial dan oleh kerana demikian mengkaryakan sejarah yang tidak sah. Hujah-hujah di sebalik tesis Milner bahawa rangkakerja Emerson tidak sah, bahawa para sejarahwan Malaya British memberikan gambaran kekuasaan British yang monolitik di mana ke semua perubahan politik dianggap berpunca dari imperialisme - cuma merupakan contoh-contoh "tinju bayang" intelektual.

Malahan William Roff (dipuji oleh Milner sebagai ilmiahwan bersendiri) dan sejarahwan Malaya British lain mempunyai pandangan yang lebih kurang sama mengenai struktur kolonial Malaya, pekerjaan orang Melayu dan dasar desentralisasi. Ini adalah satu pandangan yang Milner sendiri mendakwahkan adalah bersesuaian dengan pandangan pegawai-pegawai kolonial British. Memandangkan bahawa kritikan Milner terhadap pengajian Malaya British adalah berasaskan tesis am serta hipotesis khusus berdasarkan perspektif kerajaannya, nyata bahawa beliau sebenarnya telah menentang asas-asas keilmiah bidang sejarah yang biasa. Sebenarnya beliau salah kerana gagal faham teks sepenuhnya, kerana memutarbelitkan dan menyembunyikan data serta juga menawarkan andaian-andaian sebagai fakta sejarah. Akhir sekali, pembalasan ini mengutarakan bahawa Milner telah tumpukan perhatiannya kepada motivasi dasar desentralisasi, dan selagi beliau tidak cuba juga menyentuh kepada pembentukan dan pelaksanaan dasar-dasar dan skema-skema British, maka selagi itulah beliau tidak mungkin boleh mencirikan orang Melayu sebagai pelaku-pelaku utama di dalam dasar desentralisasi.

*This rejoinder concedes that in his paper A.C. Milner (*Kajian*, Vol., IV, No. 2) has made helpful comments on historical methods and some valid, though generally-known, criticisms of British Malayan history. It however, rejects Milner's general thesis that British Malayan historians are captives of the colonial records and write essentially bad history. The supporting arguments for his thesis - namely, that the Emerson framework is invalid, that British Malayan historians present a monolithic British power in Malaya and that these historians attribute all political changes in Malaya to British imperialism - are fine examples of intellectual shadow-boxing. Moreover, William Roff (whom Milner praises as an independent scholar) and British Malayan historians hold basically the same views on the Malayan colonial structure, Malay employment and decentralisation - views which Milner alleges are entirely compatible with those of British officials. As Milner's critique of British Malayan studies is dictated by his general thesis and kerajaan-based hypothesis on decentralisation, he goes "against the grain" of basic tenets of historical scholarship. He is guilty*

of the failure to understand the text fully, of the distortion, misrepresentation and suppression of data, and of offering assumptions as historical facts. Finally, the rejoinder points out that Milner concentrates on the motivation of decentralisation and that unless he also deals with the formulation and implementation of British policy and schemes, he is not likely to be able to feature the Malays as the principal actors in decentralisation.

PART I: MILNER ON PERSPECTIVES AND METHODS

I have read with great care Milner's paper entitled "Colonial Records History: British Malaya" that appears in *Kajian Malaysia*, Vol. 4, No. 2. It is a very interesting paper, useful in terms of ideas but extremely weak in terms of arguments and facts. I shall try to answer his points as fully as possible but should perhaps first state that my views may not necessarily reflect those of other British Malayan historians.

Milner states that British Malayan history is "colonial" in the sense that it portrays the British as the principal actors" and that "the development and execution of British policy are the main concerns of this history".¹ Subject to very important qualifications concerning the British role in policy and administration as discussed later, Milner is only stating the obvious. And taking the term "colonial" in the neutral sense, it cannot be denied that colonial history is a central component of Malayan history. The British were the rulers of Malaya for many decades, principal actors in Malaya's historical process and major contributors to the transformation of the country into a relatively modern state. I hold the view that their role in Malayan history should be accorded due recognition and be studied. Needless to say, it is not justifiable to over-play this role as would have been the case if it is true that the British Malayan historian traces 'all political forces and processes in colonial Malaya to British imperialism' as Milner alleges. Without prejudging Milner's *kerajaan*-based study, I feel that an account which plays down the British role by presenting them as subsidiary figures in British policy and administration may well distort Malayan history. The objective should always be a balanced history of the British role in Malaya, written from an acceptable perspective. A good grasp of this history would also assist scholars working on other aspects of Malayan history. I see no harm in Milner using the term "colonial", as a non-pejorative term, to characterise British Malayan studies.

Milner's second point is that the perspective of British Malayan studies is "a British perspective ... in the sense that it focusses on British policy and British administration" (Milner, p. 8). However, there is a very important distinction between "British perspective" and "British policy and administration". While the subject matter of British Malayan history is obviously the latter, it does not follow from this that the historian slavishly adopts the perspective of the British officials (who themselves often held differing views on various issues) under study. The British Malayan historian whom Milner assails is a professional trained in the modern historical method, not a court historian or a chronicler as Milner alleges (Milner, p. 6). He is fully aware that the British officials had their own perspective which was determined by their own time and work. His own perspective has benefitted from the passage of time, release of various sources, objectivity and understanding of the facts. For this reason,

the perspective of British Malayan history written by administrators such as Frank Swettenham differs sharply from that of the works of prewar scholars like Rupert Emerson or the postwar British Malayan historians.

The perspective of the British Malayan historian is more balanced, broader and more revealing than that of the British officials and is certainly not "colonial" in the pejorative sense. This perspective is the product of the interplay between the British perspective, the historians's training and critical faculty, and different values nurtured by time and place. The vital extra input that comes from the historian as a free and active agent makes all the difference between his perspective and that of the British administrators. It is this input that enables the historian to engage in British Malayan studies without justifying or glorifying British rule or presenting a warped account of the Malayan communities. I believe that the perspective of the modern British Malayan historian, which differs significantly from that of the old British officials and official-historians, is an acceptable perspective for the study of British policy and administration, even if this is not the only or best perspective.

Another pertinent point to note is that if we view Malayan history as a complex whole with multi-faceted aspects, it is obviously advantageous to study the diverse aspects from as many perspectives as possible in order to gain as comprehensive a view of the country's history as possible. What the historian should strenuously avoid is to adopt a narrow, dogmatic approach which allows a preconceived notion to dictate the selection, analysis and assessment of the historical data. The reliability of a study based on such an approach is open to grave doubts.

In this regard there is cause for concern that Milner has adopted such a dogmatic approach. Before he has started or completed his research, he has already rejected the major findings of British Malayan studies on the grounds that the authors are captives of the colonial records. This assumption is strengthened by a *kerajaan*-based hypothesis in which the Rulers and the Malays are presented as the driving force behind decentralisation (Milner, pp. 14). Milner makes no allowance for the possibility that his research findings may unsettle his assumption and confirm that British Malayan studies are essentially reliable studies. As we shall see, this assumption and his *kerajaan*-based hypothesis dictate his critique of British Malayan studies.

Milner considers British Malayan historians as "a school of historians" who are nurtured to follow "a colonial tradition" of historical writing and to prefer Western sources and "colonial" topics (Milner, pp. 1, 8). I do not think such a school exists. What British Malayan historians have in common is their university training in Western or modern historical methods. True, many British officials, as Milner points out, were trained in a similar fashion in that they studied history in their undergraduate days. But the fact of a university education does not determine or explain everything and even history taught at the universities does not stand still. Milner himself has had the same type of training, yet he differs from the rest of us. Thus trained, the historian is able to venture into various areas of investigation at different times and in different ways. For instance, Anthony Reid first worked on Dutch colonial history in

Acheh and then moved to new fields. The late Professor Wong Lin Ken, a student of "colonial" historians, plunged into a non-colonial area from the outset and never wrote any British Malayan study. Likewise trained by "colonial" historians (and others), I first embarked on a study of Singapore's movement towards political independence in which the British do not appear as *the* principal figures,² and later took up a British Malayan study.

The preference of the British Malayan historians for western sources is also not due to their training but chiefly to the fact that these sources are the most important sources for the study of British policy and administration. The choices of research and tutorial topics are determined by several considerations, of which the most important may well be one's historical context. At a particular point of time, certain research areas and themes occupy the centre stage in historical scholarship, and these generally become favourite topics for researchers and tutorial classes. If it were true, as Milner alleges, that conflicting interpretations in "colonial" history were the hot topics among British officials attending these classes, the reason was largely because British Malayan studies happened to be the prevailing interest at the time. With some exceptions, there is no truth in Milner's charge that modern British Malayan studies are based on tutorials attended by British officials (Milner, p. 8). It is highly doubtful that historical works which are critical of imperialism such as Emerson's *Malaysia* would have been welcomed in classes attended by British officials. I do not consider this attempt of Milner to tar British Malayan historians with a colonial brush to be a fair practice.

Milner's comments on methods and sources are interesting and useful, but generally known. I agree that his suggestions, judiciously applied, may enable a historian to arrive at a clearer and more rounded understanding of the colonial records of Malaya. I do not, however, in the least believe that if the British Malayan historian does not use sociological paradigms and jargon in historical investigations and rely significantly on non-colonial records, he will be shackled by the British documentary discourses and write essentially bad history.

Milner is, of course, free to read the colonial records "against the grain" in the manner he advocates and write a *kerajaan*-based study on decentralisation and Malay employment. That is his privilege. But it does not follow from this that other historians who adopt a different approach cannot write good colonial history. In studying colonial history, the British Malayan historian does not swallow everything that the British officials said or wrote without "a grain of salt". For this reason, colonial and other documents have to be very critically read, analysed and assessed in order that the historical study may render an accurate and fair account of the events and issues concerned. In undertaking this task, the historian uses his professional expertise, his critical faculty and a range of analytical tools for research in order to separate the grain from the chaff, discount or even reverse the values embedded in the official discourses whenever necessary, search for hidden meanings in British statements and discussions, and present a fresh synthesis for the consideration of his readers. Indeed, a good historian is expected to do all this. I do not think that the British Malayan historian's approach differs much from the technique of reading documents "against the grain", unless, of course, Milner

has in mind the idea of turning the colonial records inside out all the time and of turning every British argument upside down. I believe such a practice is bizarre to say the least.

I am, of course, aware that historians have benefitted from the use of sociological paradigms (and other disciplines) in their research on Southeast Asian history, and that British Malayan historians have generally not done so. I do not think that this stems from the latter's "disdain for sociological paradigms" (and other disciplines) as Milner alleges (Milner, p. 9.). I can see no objection to a British Malayan historian using such paradigms for his research and they may prove beneficial. A word of caution however. While a historian is at liberty to apply these paradigms to his work, he should not violate the basic tenets of historical scholarship. (As we shall see, Milner is frequently guilty of this in his paper). Another pertinent point is that these paradigms may be value-laden and, if injudiciously applied, may distort history. The crux of the matter rests on the calibre of the historian. In the hands of scholars of penetrating mind and solid integrity, sociological tools can significantly contribute to high quality history. In the hands of lesser scholars, they may contribute to speculative history of the extreme kind. Hence, while the use of sociological paradigms in historical research is welcome, we should resist the tendency to accord merit to Malayan studies simply because of the novelty of the approach or to look with disdain on the approach of the conventional historian.

The most valid, though generally-known, criticism Milner makes is that the British Malayan historian relies almost totally on the Malayan colonial records. This point has two major corollaries. First, the historian misses out on data in the non-English sources. The significance of this, of course, depends on the nature of the research topic. For instance, in a study of British policy towards the Chinese national salvation movement in Malaya, 1937-42, the Chinese sources will be of crucial importance. Without the benefit of reading these sources, the historian would find it extremely difficult to evaluate the reliability of British perceptions of the movement and to present accurately the Chinese side of this historical event. On the other hand, non-English sources will not be so useful for a study, say, of the Malayan hill resorts. This is necessarily an aspect of British social history. Although decentralisation stands nearer to the latter case, non-English sources are nonetheless important. The most important of these are the Malay sources, especially the Malay newspapers and the archival records of the Malay ruling houses and elite. I have been advised by experts that the Malay newspapers shed interesting light on decentralisation during the 1930s (not the 1920s which is the period of my study). I am unsure whether the archival records of the FMS ruling houses and other Malay leaders exist, are accessible to scholars, and offer a very substantial body of data on decentralisation, 1920-40. If they do, then my study may not have adequately examined and discussed the role of the Malay Rulers and elite in decentralisation. Whether this will radically alter the decentralisation story as currently told, however, remains to be seen. As an aside, such sources will be of vital importance to Milner's proposed *kerajaan*-based study.

Second, the non-English sources enable the historian to view his data from different perspectives and have some kind of "external" check over his English

sources, thereby helping him to achieve a more rounded treatment of the subject. But it does not necessarily follow that the failure to consult these sources would result in the historian's enslavement by the colonial records. As stated earlier, a competent historian is not a passive agent blindly allowing himself to be bound (if not gagged) by his sources. It is he, as a free and active agent, who determines the final conception of his work. I submit, therefore, that the calibre of the historian, not the sources, is the decisive factor in determining the final outcome of historical research. At the same time, no historian can be independent of his sources. For instance, no matter from what perspective he studies decentralisation in Malaya, he will have to rely largely on the colonial records which document, far more comprehensively than any other sources, this major historical development in Malaya. Admittedly, these records do help to set the agenda of a decentralisation study to a greater or lesser extent. But this is not a unique feature of the Malayan colonial records; rather, this is a common feature of most historical records. For instance, the agenda of a study of the Malayan Kuomintang (KMT) will be set, to a greater or lesser degree, by the KMT archival records (the main source) upon which the study is based. The historian may benefit from non-KMT sources but he cannot be entirely free from the limitations set by the party records when he constructs the parameters and decides on the issues to be included in his discussion. In his paper Milner plays up the fact that the Malayan colonial records help set the agenda of a study as if historical records in general do not perform this function.

PART II: MILNER'S CASE AGAINST BRITISH MALAYAN HISTORIANS

Milner's general thesis is that recent British Malayan historians are captive of the colonial records and consequently they have written essentially bad history. Fortunately for the reader, he has attempted to substantiate his charge and his arguments may be assessed in order to determine the validity of his general thesis. "The proof of the pudding", as the saying goes, "is in the eating".

Milner Challenges the Emerson Framework

First of all, Milner challenges the Emerson framework - a central pillar of British Malayan studies - which he depicts as a framework in which the British exercised real power in Malaya, while the Malay Rulers' role was almost wholly confined to "pomp and ceremony" in the system of indirect rule. He alleges that British Malayan historians view the power and the ceremonial aspects of the above system as a "binary opposition" (Milner, p. 6). To begin with, Milner has oversimplified the Emerson framework which has two components. In the Federated Malay States (FMS) the position was as defined by Milner, whereas in the Unfederated Malay States (UMS) the Malay rulers and elite did share with the British the exercise of real power.³ The framework as defined by Milner therefore, could only be applied to the FMS. This distinction between the positions of the two groups of Malay states is rather well-known.

After 1874 the British established in Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang (collectively known as the FMS after 1896) an alien political system.

This system was superimposed onto the indigenous political structures of these states. Under the new British dispensation, Malay political and social institutions were generally preserved, and the Rulers' power in the sphere of religion and Malay *adat* was recognised in the various Anglo-Malay treaties. The British system however, absorbed the governmental power of the traditional Malay elite of these states. The exercise of real power in this alien system came to be expressed in terms of the formation and execution of policy, the direction and management of a western administration, and the actual government of the states. In the FMS, unlike the UMS, the traditional Malay elite, except the Malay administrators, were generally not admitted into this official machine and therefore, played no active role in policy matters and general administration. However, the FMS Rulers were assigned a largely advisory and ceremonial role in this alien system so that they would lend legitimacy and support to British indirect rule.

What Milner has done in his so-called challenge to the Emerson framework is to highlight the Ruler's ceremonial role in the Malay polity. He can see no distinction between "ceremony" and "power" in the federated states. "Ceremony was", he writes, "the substance of the state. It was the raja's 'work' (*kerja*)" (Milner, p. 11). His contention that the Ruler's position had hardly changed in the FMS is only partially true as we shall see. Most importantly, while "ceremony" might have been the substance of a traditional Malay state, the FMS was not such a state but a modern multi-racial polity under British control. In this twentieth-century polity, as mentioned earlier, the British exercised real power through an alien political framework.

Hence, the distinction between "ceremony" and "power" was a political reality in the FMS. This is *the* key point. Until Milner has effectively demonstrated that this distinction was non-existent in the FMS, he has not really challenged the Emerson framework. Tun Abdul Razak, the late Prime Minister of Malaysia, touches on this point when he recalls his experience during the Sultan of Pahang's coronation in 1932. He states:

"The thought came to me when I was 10 years old, how badly we were treated by the British. We had the coronation of the present Sultan in 1932. I was 10 years old. They built a very big hall, and all the chiefs including my father, all nicely dressed, all stood in the hall, and the British Governor and the Residents were there. Everyone else was standing; but they sat down. That picture has always stuck in my mind. The British put us on a stage like *prima donnas*, but with no part to play. This was our country, but they sat there and ruled it, and all that we could do was to stand by and watch. I remember that occasion very well."⁴

Here then is a Malay's perception in 1932, and it accords with the Emerson framework of 1937.

The nub of the matter is that the Emerson framework can only be undermined or demolished through a successful demonstration of the FMS Malay rulers and traditional elite operating in the official machine and sharing with British bureaucrats the wielding of real power and the actual administration of the

states. Until this is accomplished, Milner is unlikely to be able to write his *kerajaan*-based book in which the Rulers and the Malays feature as the principal actors in the decentralisation movement. Yet he has made no such attempt. The Emerson framework therefore remains intact because Milner has yet to enter the arena to challenge this framework.

Milner's Alleged Monolithic British Power in Malaya

Milner writes that in British Malayan studies "British power in Malaya is given a monolithic character" (Milner, p. 6). He argues that this stems from the failure of the historians to "decode" the term "ceremony" and their dismissal "of the Malay Rulers as insignificant in the colonial period". To Milner, "ceremony is the substance of the state."

Milner is, of course, free to decode the term but he has no right to 'miscode' the historians he criticises. When British Malayan historians refer to the Ruler's ceremonial role, they are thinking of the latter's role in the pomp and ceremony surrounding the British system of indirect rule. British Malayan historians do not hold the view that the Rulers' ceremonial role in the British system was identical with their ceremonial role in the Malay social order. It is important to remember that in his study, Emerson's "primary purpose is to explore the history, structure, and working of the (alien) political system (and not of the Malay polity) in the Malay Peninsula" (Emerson, p. 8, my added clarifications).

Recent British Malayan historians do not dismiss the Malay Rulers as unimportant in colonial Malaya as we shall see. When they describe the Rulers as "figureheads" (as does Khasnor Johan), they are only referring to the latter's nominal role in the FMS administration. The historians are, of course, aware of the Rulers' supremacy in the Malay polity. Khasnor Johan has discussed this question in considerable detail when she places the Malay MAS officers within the social hierarchy of the Malay society and delineates the relationship between these officers and the traditional Malay elite.⁵

Emerson only examines this question in so far as it had a direct bearing on British rule. Hence, he repeatedly lays stress on British efforts to enhance the Rulers' status and prestige, support their role in religion and *adat*, and generally uphold their influence in Malay social life. "Both their dignity and their wealth", Emerson asserts, "are greater as Sultans in a British federation than they could have been as independent rulers of separate Malay States." "The rulers have lost their power," he adds, "but they have by no means equally lost their influence" (Emerson, p. 140). Indeed, the British are seen as acutely conscious of the fact that the Rulers' contributions to the strengthening of indirect rule depended vitally on the latter's position in the Malay society. The stronger the Rulers' prestige and status were in this society, the greater would be the benefits that could be derived for British indirect rule. In other words, the Rulers' supremacy in the Malay social order and the British exercise of real power in the alien political system, are presented as co-existing symbiotically side by side, complementary and mutually self-reinforcing.

Milner, of course, offers other evidence in support of his allegation that British Malayan historians consider the Rulers insignificant and consequently present a monolithic British power in Malaya. Frank Swettenham's opposition to the idea of annexation of the Malay states in 1893 is cited as an example of the significance the British attached to the "Raja in the colonial balance." He accordingly claims that British power in Malaya was not monolithic. To give additional support to this contention, Milner cites Wilson's well-known statement that "the maintenance of the position, authority and prestige of the Malay rulers must always be a cardinal point in British policy". All these, Milner contends, "directly contradict the view of the colonial structure Emerson promoted" (Milner, p. 12).

I find Milner rather amusing in this section of his paper - amusing because the points he raises have already been well discussed in the existing British Malayan studies. In addition, these studies have examined in detail many other issues that likewise attest to the importance the British attached to the Rulers in Malaya. Yet Milner presents Swettenham's and Wilson's views as though they are new discoveries and brilliantly attempts to use them to enlighten the historians who first made them. In doing so Milner implies that these historians are unaware of the more subtle views of British policy-makers and rest their studies on data provided by "the clerks, residents and district officers who understandably conveyed a 'colonial' perspective in their writings" (Milner, p. 12). A strange way for someone relatively unfamiliar with the archival records to talk down to British Malayan historians. I can assure Milner that British Malayan historians are very familiar indeed with the view of both Swettenham and Wilson and have thoroughly evaluated their implications to British rule in Malaya.⁶ In any case, the annexation of the Malay states was a non-issue during the inter-war years and is not a good example to illustrate the limitations of British power in Malaya and the importance of the Malay Rulers to British rule.

British Malayan Historians on the Limitations of British Power

British Malayan scholars have clearly recognised the limitations of British power in Malaya. In addition, they have discussed how the Malay elite shared with British officials the exercise of real power in the UMS. The first major limitation of British power in Malaya was set by the Anglo-Malay treaties. Under international law, these treaties did not undermine the *de jure* sovereignty of the Malay Rulers who were accordingly not subject to the jurisdiction of the British Parliament or the British courts.⁷ Implicitly, the British could not legally do anything in the Malay states contrary to the terms of the treaties, and if they decided to do so new treaties had to be contracted. For this reason, new treaties were signed in 1895, 1909, 1923, 1927, 1930 and so forth. While the British had frequently violated the *adat* clause in the treaties, they were fully aware, as Milner rightly points out, that the rulers were prepared to resist any important encroachment on their sovereignty. In such an eventuality, the British could overcome the treaty obstacle by exercising the rights of paramountcy but no justification existed for this course of action. Under the circumstances, they faced a dilemma: governmental inaction would seriously damage British prestige whilst coercion, on the other hand, would alienate the Rulers and might create

serious political problems. To avert dilemmas of this kind, the colonial power imposed on itself substantial self-restraints, and consequently, the Anglo-Malay treaties served as an important check on British power during the inter-war years.⁸

This point is well illustrated by a brief look at British unification policy in Malaya. I have discussed how the British adopted in 1920 a policy to form a Malayan federation and how they decided not to force it on the Malay Rulers. They were fully aware that the Rulers of Johore and Kedah would actively oppose the policy, while Sultan Iskandar of Perak, although not averse to the idea, was hostile to the merger of the Malay states and the Straits Settlements. Accordingly, the British decided to exclude the Straits Settlements from the proposed Malayan federation and to leave the entire policy to be determined by the wishes of all the Rulers (Yeo, p. 281). They knew that there was no justification for forcing the rulers to sign new treaties to legalise and legitimise the creation of a Malayan federation. They recognised the limits of their authority and allowed the Rulers' views and the treaties to block the progress of this central policy and even help define the nature of the proposed Malayan federation before 1942.

The second limitation of colonial authority was set by British conviction that the Rulers substantially contributed to political stability in Malaya. The British had secured, with relative ease, peaceful and stable rule in Malaya and saw no sense in jeopardising this by antagonising the Malays. After all, the Rulers were perceived as an anchor of political stability in the Malay states. Commenting on the need to strengthen the sultanates in 1928, Ormsby-Gore stressed that the Malay Rulers were "a real and essential asset" without whom "the Malays would have become a mob" (Yeo, p. 39). And during the Selangor succession dispute, 1933-38, the British refused to drop their decision to make the Sultan's third son Raja Muda in order to meet the Rulers' preference for his second son. They justified their action on the ground that an ineffective ruler would eventually destabilise Selangor which would necessitate a far more drastic British intervention.⁹ Because of the considerable importance they attached to the Rulers, the British avoided taking measures, unless essential, that might alienate them and sour British-Malay relations in the states.

The above approach permitted the Rulers some leeway to have their particular needs satisfied, occasionally against British wishes, especially in the UMS. For instance, in September 1920 the Johore Ruler-in-Council successfully rejected a British proposal to re-designate the judges in Johore Judicial Commissioner as was the practice in the FMS. The Council feared that the British proposal was "an attempt to draw Johore into the FMS with a wedge" (Yeo, p. 23). Numerous minor incidents of this kind occurred in the UMS, which had the cumulative effect of helping to preserve the autonomy and the indigenous structure of the states.¹⁰ The British were compelled to operate through the framework of each state - a situation that tended to limit the British exercise of power.

The *modus operandi* of the colonial power in Malaya constituted another constraint on British power. The British had usually sought to have policy

accepted through discussion, conciliation and co-operation with interested parties who mattered. This enabled non-Malay capitalist interests, the best organised and most articulate lobby in Malaya, to resist what they considered to be undesirable policies. I have discussed in my book how capitalist interests helped substantially to frustrate Guillemard's decentralisation policy (Yeo, chs. 9-10). And Emerson has shown how capitalists even limited the Governor's exercise of authority in the Straits Settlements itself (Emerson, pp. 275-7).

In British-Rulers relations, the British *modus operandi* was finely honed into a distinctive style. The objective was always to arrive at a "tactful compromise" in any difficult situation - a prerequisite for effective British indirect rule. Both parties tacitly agreed on "the danger and futility of forcing the use of (British coercive) power", and endeavoured to avoid it at all times. This British Malayan style significantly curbed British power in the Malay states, especially Johore. Emerson (pp. 210-1) explains the situation in this way:

"The maintenance of the prestige of the ruler is clearly not compatible with a high-handed overruling of his policies and wishes, nor is such action compatible with the good governance of the country. *Where the ruler is actively and intelligently interested in maintaining his traditional power in the affairs of state it is impossible to ignore him without running the risk of the gravest consequences ...* (The Sultan of Johore) has his own native and underground channels of communication which keep him in close touch with what is happening and with what people are thinking in all parts of the country. As against the alien, furthermore, he has a prestige that enables him to undertake distant reprisals which he is in a position to disavow publicly with the blandest of smiles. The formal machinery of the state is perhaps ultimately beyond his grasp but a little discreet sabotage can do much to wreck any machine. The same tactics are, of course, equally available as against any (offending) planter, miner or merchants ... *These statements ... in varying degree, obviously hold true for the other rulers as well ...*" (emphasis added).

Milner alleges that Emerson has wrongly "dismissed the Malay rule as insignificant in the colonial period." Clearly, it is Milner who has failed to understand Emerson.

Finally British Malayan studies have acknowledged the *practical* importance of the Rulers to British rule in Malaya. Sadka has ably discussed how the utilisation of Malay institutions greatly facilitated the establishment of a stable British rule in the protected Malay states during the late nineteenth century. Emerson has pointed out that during the inter-war years indirect rule tended to slow down the emergence of a Malay anti-colonial movement, that the Rulers were "admirable advisers" to British administrators, and that they served as nominal centres of power in the states. During the thirties, the British exploited the last point in order to reject non-Malay Asian demands for a share of political power in the country (Emerson, pp. 17, 140-1; Yeo, pp. 50-1). All this Milner has either not grasped or conveniently ignored.

Milner uses only one criterion namely, the Rulers' importance in the colonial equation, for deciding that British power in Malaya was not monolithic. I think I have adequately established that British Malayan studies, judged by the same criterion and by the limitations of colonial authority, do *not* indeed present a monolithic British power in Malaya. In fact, the colonial structure was also not monolithic. Sadka and Thio have both taken pains to show how conditions differed from state to state. And apart from contrasting the colonial structures in the FMS and the UMS, Emerson brings out clearly local variations among the unfederated states. Overall, British Malayan studies depict British colonialism in Malaya as an untidy business and the colonial structure as "a patch-work".

Now, for the last point. To Milner, Swettenham's views and Wilson's statement "directly contradict" Emerson's colonial structure. It is tiresome but necessary to repeat that the above issues have no applicability to the UMS component of the Emerson framework. In the FMS context they are merely a pointer to the British recognition of the Rulers' importance to indirect rule. To effectively challenge Emerson's colonial structure, Milner would have to carry his logic a step further by demonstrating that because of their importance the Rulers were admitted into the official machine and shared with British bureaucrats the exercise of real power in the states. Unfortunately, he has made no effort to establish that key point.

British Imperialism: The Alleged Source of Change in Malay

Milner's second major criticism states that in British Malayan studies the British always appeared as the only principal actors in British policy and administration (Milner, p. 3). The situation was actually more complex than that. In these studies, the British are generally and rightly presented as the chief players, especially in the direction and management of the alien bureaucracy in the FMS before 1942. But this was not inevitably the case, especially in the sphere of British policy. Frequently, a non-British personality or group would enter the scene to play a major role, or even for a while *the* principal role, in certain aspects or at a particular juncture in the development of British policy. For instance, Sadka and Chew have clearly shown that Kuala Lumpur in the 1870's and 1880's was governed by two dominant personalities - Frank Swettenham and Yap Ah Loy.¹¹ In my paper on the Selangor succession dispute, Sultan Sulaiman of Selangor and (after 1936) Sultan Ibrahim of Johore, Roland Braddell and Frank Swettenham played major roles in the controversy. As we shall see, Sultan Iskandar was a principal actor in helping to bring forth Guillemard's decentralisation policy late in 1924. The question therefore, should not be seen in the bold black-or-white terms as Milner tends to do. If he disagrees with our presentation of the British role in Malaya, he is, of course, welcome to demolish it.

The alternative Milner offers is that the Malay Rulers and their subjects should replace the British as the principal actors in British policy and administration. Hence, he has criticised me for not presenting the Sultans as the principal personalities in decentralisation; Khasnor Johan for not attributing the formation of the MAS to Sultan Idris; and Ghosh for not discussing "the formation and execution of the (decentralisation) policy in the Malay court" (Milner, pp 6-7, 10). Milner offers no solid evidence to substantiate his

criticisms. He simply *assumes* that the points he raises in his criticisms were actual historical events. He then proceeds to outline a proposed study based on a *kerajaan* perspective in which the Rulers and Malays would be staged as the principal actors in decentralisation and Malay employment. This is offered as a possible alternative; it has clearly still to be tested. If successfully executed, his study may well spawn a school of Milnerites who will chart a new course for Malayan historical scholarship. But until he has written a book on decentralisation, based on a *kerajaan* perspective that has recognised merits, he cannot speak with any degree of authority on the subject.

As discussed earlier, Milner alleges that the perspective of British Malayan studies is a British perspective in the sense that it focusses on British policy and administration. From this position, he levels charges against British Malayan historians. He writes:

"An historian may choose to explore, we assume, any dimension of a particular historical situation. But these historians of British Malaya do not merely decide to focus on the colonial officials rather than the Southeast Asian subjects. To do that would be unfashionable but harmless. In these studies the British administrators are not merely the principal actors but it is also they who are seen to generate change. In colonial Malaya the political forces and processes - whether they be considered by the historian to be good or evil - tend to find their origins in British imperialism" (Milner, p. 8).

In other words, British Malayan historians endeavour to be fashionable by playing up the British factor as the source of all political changes in the country. We shall examine these allegations in terms of changes in British policy and administration as well as of general political changes in Malaya.

Change in British Policy and Administration

First, Milner alleges that in British Malayan studies the British officials are the only ones "seen to generate change." Here again, one sees the straitjacket way with which changes in British policy and administration are viewed. British Malayan studies do not claim that British bureaucrats were the only political actors who initiated such changes. Very frequently they attribute these changes to the interactions between several sets of factors. At other times British Malayan historians explain political changes as the by-products of British reactions to events beyond their control. And, as the colonial power, British officials are naturally seen as principal agents of change in policy and administration. In all this the British policy-makers were the ones who had to take the decisions and implement the policy changes because they held power and controlled the official machine in the FMS; their position in the UMS, as noted earlier, was significantly different. For this reason, in my view, British officials were most rarely subsidiary figures in British policy and administration in Malaya during the inter-war years.

A few examples of policy changes will suffice to prove my point. In *Nineteenth-Century Malaya*, Cowan attributes British policy change from non-intervention to intervention largely to an external source: fear of

intervention by a third Power in the Malay states.¹² Generally, British Malayan studies explain the abandonment of the Malayan Union Scheme of 1946 in terms of British reactions to political changes in the country beyond their control, especially the powerful agitation by the UMNO.¹³ I have mentioned how the Kreta Ayer riots of March 1927 motivated the British to introduce the 1928 immigration restriction law and discussed how the massive strikes in Malaya, 1936-37, engendered a fundamental change in British labour policy from non-recognition to recognition of trade unions in Malaya.¹⁴

I must now ask the reader's indulgence for a fairly lengthy summary of my account of Iskandar's visit to London which Milner has twice criticised in *Kajian Malaysia* and *Rima*. According to him, I have presented Iskandar as a mere "pawn in civil service infighting". In support of this he cites my statements that the Sultan's appeal was "possibly instigated by Guillemard" and that Collins "exploited" or "made dexterous use of the Sultan's petition" to persuade his CO colleagues to adopt his own ideas on decentralisation. Milner, therefore, alleges that I consider Iskandar's contribution to decentralisation to be "peripheral" and that I "do not even allow for the possibility that the Sultan might have been the principal figure in stimulating the new policy" (Milner, pp. 6-7).

I offer below an accurate summary of my account of this event. On the eve of Iskandar's visit, "the Guillemard-Maxwell power struggle gradually undermined Whitehall's confidence and trust in the Chief Secretary." Hence, I continue, "the Colonial Office was rendered receptive to any wind of change blowing from the FMS" (Yeo, pp. 208-9). Meantime, in Malaya "Iskandar became profoundly troubled by Maxwell increasingly centralising power in his own hands in 1924" (Yeo, p. 210). I do not explicitly state but certainly imply that Iskandar's unhappiness, together with his "desire for a large degree of state power," (Yeo, p. 211) was mainly responsible for his trip to London to press for a radical decentralisation policy. I add, however, that his visit "might have been partly instigated by the High Commissioner" (Yeo, p. 211). His visit "triggered a chain of political actions and manoeuvres". On the strong impact of his visit, I write (Yeo, p. 213).

"The Sultan's disenchantment shattered whatever confidence Whitehall still had in Maxwell. Collins concluded that 'not only is the present system wrong, but the man who works it, Sir George Maxwell, is clearly using his practically autocratic powers in an arbitrary manner, and is showing less and less tact and sympathy with the Rulers'".

Collins then blamed Maxwell's greed for power for the lack of progress in decentralisation in the FMS. He added (Yeo, p. 214):

"Maxwell would be 'the chief obstacle to a complete political reorganisation in Malaysia'. Collins advised that if necessary the Chief Secretary should be retired before his term of service expired in May 1926".

This advice was intended to clear the stage for a new policy.

Once the above advice was made, the question confronting Whitehall officials was the nature of the new policy to be adopted. I continue (Yeo, p. 214):

"Collins came out strongly in support of the Sultan. As early as November 1920, it will be recalled, Collins had unsuccessfully advocated a radical decentralisation policy based on the conversion of the Chief Secretary into a co-ordinating officer. He now made dexterous use of the Sultan's petition in order to persuade the Colonial Office to adopt his ideas on decentralisation".

I should add that it was only natural that Collins should now revive his radical scheme of 1920 (which was similar to Iskandar's own proposal) and tried to use the sultan's appeal to secure Whitehall's approval of it.¹⁵ To cut the story short, Whitehall eventually decided to retire Maxwell and adopt a new decentralisation policy.

It is clear from the above that Milner has grossly distorted my views. What he has done is to play up two statements lifted from my nine-page account of Iskandar's visit - one on the possibility that Guillemard might have partly instigated the visit, the other on Collins using or exploiting the Sultan's appeal to push his own ideas on decentralisation - in order to convey the impression that I regard Iskandar as a mere "pawn in civil service infighting". *He ignores completely* all the rest of my analysis including *my explicit assessment of the impact of the visit on decentralisation*. The overall effect of all this would be to mislead the reader into believing that I consider the Sultan to have hardly contributed to the new decentralisation policy. Based on this incorrect interpretation of my views, Milner then proceeds to draw the conclusion that I always trace changes in British policy and administration to the British bureaucrats themselves.

I should add that my account clearly shows that Iskandar made a major contribution to the decision to remove Maxwell from the FMS and to paving the way for the birth of the Guillemard policy. In terms of this impact Iskandar was clearly one of the major players at this juncture of decentralisation, but not "*the principal figure in stimulating the new policy*". I still hold the view that had the Colonial Office not already been pursuing a decentralisation policy since 1920, had Whitehall not lost confidence in Maxwell, and had Collins not championed the new policy, Iskandar's visit would not have made such a powerful impact. The nub of the matter is that as in the case of many major policies, the Guillemard policy was a by-product of the interaction of various forces - the Maxwell-Guillemard power struggle, Collins' role, Sultan Iskandar's visit, and Guillemard's response. Most certainly, my account does not mean or imply that I always consider British bureaucrats as *the* initiators of change in Malaya.

General Political Change in Malaya

Perhaps carried away by his own eloquence, Milner takes the bit between his teeth and makes a sweeping charge. He writes, "In Colonial Malaya the

political forces and processes tend (in British Malayan studies) to find their origins in British imperialism" (Milner, p. 8). This is truly a blow below the belt. As Milner is well aware, British Malayan studies examine British policy and administration and completely ignore many "political forces and processes" at work in Colonial Malaya. How then could these studies locate the origins of all "political forces and processes" in Malaya in British imperialism? For instance, my *Decentralisation* study does not discuss the Kesatuan Melayu Muda in Malaya or the Malayan Communist Party. Surely, a critic can hardly be considered credible if he should allege that I tend to trace the origins of these two political movements to British imperialism. Milner does not have a leg to stand on in his allegation that British Malayan historians attempt to be fashionable by attributing all political changes in Malaya to the British.

The point to note is that whether British imperialism was pertinent will chiefly depend on the nature of the topic under investigation. It is nonsensical, for instance, to trace the origins of the Kaum Muda Movement or the Malayan Kuomintang to a British source. On the other hand, the British were chiefly behind the formulation and implementation of decentralisation in the FMS. British Malayan historians, being professionals, should be credited with the ability to grasp the above point and the common sense not to pass judgement on "political forces and processes in Malaya" that do not fall within the purview of their studies.

William Roff: An Index of Comparison

It is a legitimate practice to use the works of an independent third party as an index for comparison in a dialogue. Milner has provided us with an excellent index in the person of William Roff for whom both he and I have high regard as an independent scholar. Milner writes of Roff as follows (Milner, p. 9):

"'Colonial records' history is not, of course, an inevitable consequence of employing colonial records ... (To escape from the discourse of the 'colonial records'), what is important is to be able to read these materials 'against the grain'. Roff does so only partly by using Malay writings and partly also by examining the colonial period from the vantage point of the concept of nationalism. His purpose is to survey the development of Malay nationalism and this priority gives him an independence when interrogating his sources. This is the critical point. The independence of the historian's question must be maintained if the records are to be read 'against the grain'".

Needless to say, I agree that Roff has read the colonial records "against the grain" for his Nationalism book as any good historian would.

Even if we accept Milner's premise that the colonial records can enslave the historian, I do not think that Roff faces such a danger if he had not consulted Malay writings and used the concept of nationalism for his study. He has examined the open and confidential colonial records for Malaya, 1876-1896, and the open records for the FMS, 1897-1920 and 1934-41, the UMS, 1921-41,

and the Malay state, 1912-21. The more important and larger confidential colonial records were not then available to him. I have read both sets of records as well as the Malayan Secretariat files quite thoroughly and know there is very little colonial writings on Malay nationalism in these records; in fact, the number of despatches on this issue can be counted by the fingers. I am prepared to state that no scholar can therefore, be enslaved by the colonial discourses on Malay nationalism; if he relies only on the colonial records he would simply not be able to write his study on Malay nationalism. This point is confirmed by Roff's book. The author depends almost wholly for his data on the Kaum Muda and the other Malay nationalist movements on Malay sources as it should be. British data are used chiefly for the colonial framework, British education, land and other policies, and incidental issues. It is therefore, rather misleading for Milner to present Roff's book as a good example of a work that has not been shackled by the colonial discourses because the author read the colonial records "against the grain" in the manner Milner advocates.

Roff and the Emerson Framework

The bulk of Roff's book deals with Malay nationalism and cannot be compared with British Malayan studies. However, Roff devotes considerable attention to discussing the Malayan colonial structure, the position of the Malay Rulers and elite, the Malay College and the MAS, and decentralisation.¹⁶ It is legitimate to compare his findings in these areas with those of British Malayan historians. Since Roff is an independent scholar and if British Malayan historians are slaves of the colonial records, as Milner contends, logically the reader should encounter basic differences in their interpretations of the above issues.

Roff's account of the colonial structure in the federated states late in the nineteenth century closely resembles that of Emily Sadka. Both consider the relations of the Resident and the Ruler in the state comparable to those between the British Prime Minister and the British Sovereign. Roff states that the Resident managed a western administration; the State Council was "the principal vehicle of British authority in each state"; the Resident exercised "direct control over every aspect of government"; the Ruler lost "all but the symbols of power"; the District Chiefs were reduced to rendering "assistance with the minor incidents of Malay life". After 1896 "all four states were administered by a large and proliferating European bureaucracy increasingly centralised in Kuala Lumpur". Here the Resident-General overshadowed the Residents in the states. In the FMS we witness "the increasingly minor role played by Malays in all aspects of the life of their state". The Sultan's position and prestige however, were carefully maintained and enhanced. Within Malay society, he not only remained supreme, but his position was strengthened by the decline of the territorial chiefs, larger incomes, and by an impressive increase in authority over religion. The UMS however, enjoyed considerable "local autonomy" and the Malay elite retained "a greater measure of real participation" in the administration of the states. Clearly, Roff's colonial structure is basically the same as the Emerson framework. To Milner, however, the Emerson framework is "a framework which is entirely compatible with the view of the colonial period from the desk of the British bureaucrat" (Milner, p. 11). It is difficult to discern how Milner reconciles the

above view with his high praise of Roff as an independent scholar who has read the colonial records "against the grain".

Roff on the MAS and Decentralisation

Roff's discussion of Malay employment and decentralisation may now be summarised. By the mid-1890s British policy-makers had begun to complain that the administration, overstuffed with European MCS officers, had become both "expensive and uneconomical". At the same time, they felt that they had failed in their moral undertaking "to teach Malays a better form of administration". Malay dissatisfaction had also been openly voiced. During the Conference of Rulers in 1903 Sultan Idris expressed Malay dissatisfaction over the lack of Malay participation in the government. The inter-play between financial considerations, Malay discontent, and British sensitivity to their moral obligations to the Malays motivated the government to take positive action. Treacher and especially Wilkinson played the major role in setting up the Malay College in 1905. The rest of Roff's chapter examines the growth of this college and the introduction and development of the MAS to 1917. The main outline and arguments in the above account do not contradict those of Khasnor, myself and others. As Roff had no access to the confidential colonial records of the interwar years, his discussion of decentralisation follows closely that of Emerson. In both decentralisation and Malay employment, Roff presents British officials, not the Rulers, as the principal actors.

By Milner's own criterion, Roff is an independent scholar who has read the colonial records "against the grain". His findings should logically be acceptable to Milner. But Roff's version of the Malayan colonial structure, decentralisation and Malay employment is basically the same as those of the supposedly enslaved British Malayan historians. One cannot but wonder whether Milner now accepts Roff's account and rejects those of British Malayan historians, or brushes both aside.

Finally, Milner writes, "Malay newspaper and books appear to have provided (Roff with) a control for the colonial records" (Milner, p. 8). I should like to invite Milner to demonstrate, with examples, how Roff uses Malay sources to corroborate, modify or demolish any data in the colonial records and how this prevents Roff's book from being shackled by the British documentary discourses. Until this is done, Milner is merely expressing an unsubstantiated opinion as in many other parts of his paper. Needless to say, whether he substantiates his assertion or not does not detract from the merits of Roff's book.

PART III: MILNER'S ERRORS

It will be helpful to scrutinise Milner's reading of British Malayan studies in order to assess his credibility as a critic and scholar. Milner comes armed with the general thesis that British Malayan historians are captives of the colonial records and write bad history. This is reinforced by his *kerajaan*-based hypothesis on decentralisation. It is this thesis-hypothesis reference that governs his review of my *Decentralisation* book and other British Malayan studies. The outcome of this approach is that the judgement of the book is

determined not so much by the critic as an open-minded and active agent as by Milner's thesis-hypothesis reference, and consequently little justice is done in the review. I shall now substantiate my charge and shall confine my comments to my *Decentralisation* book as far as possible.

Errors

Constricted by his thesis-hypothesis reference, Milner does not take pain to read my book carefully. Consequently, he has misunderstood a number of issues in my book.

- 1) **Error:** "The (decentralisation) policy was primarily an economy measure." (Milner, p. 2)

Comment: This does not represent my view (or Ghosh's). As discussed in my studies (and Ghosh's book), the decentralisation policy was primarily political in nature.

- 2) **Error:** "Yeo, in one instance, questions Ghosh's conclusion that the British were influenced by a desire to 'consolidate the Malay monarchies' in order to 'preserve the traditional values of the Malay community.' I tend to agree with Ghosh but it may prove difficult to provide the official written evidence to satisfy the procedure of scrutiny adopted by Yeo" (Milner, p. 5).

Comment: If Milner would care to read the second paragraph of page 327 of my book again, he will find that I *agree* with Ghosh that "the British intended to consolidate the Malay monarchies so as to preserve the traditional values of the Malay communities". Where I disagree with him is that the above issue supports his contention that the Malay factor was the more important of the two principal motivations behind the decentralisation policy. In siding with Ghosh against me - actually over a non-issue -, Milner gives an example of his desperate search for supporting data for his *kerajaan*-based hypothesis.¹⁷ For the benefit of Milner, I should mention that there is considerable documentary evidence in support of British interest in strengthening the Malay monarchies. This question is discussed briefly in my book (Yeo, pp. 39-40, 50, 59, 344-345) and in substantial detail in my paper on the Selangor succession dispute. Incidentally, the data provided above support wilson's statement that "the maintenance of the position, authority and prestige of the Malay rulers must always be a cardinal point in British policy."

- 3) **Error:** "the Raja certainly has to be respected and, even in his retirement years, Swettenham warned that despite the customary public silence of the ruling elite (*and thus their silence in the colonial records*) the elite nonetheless felt very strongly indeed on all matters concerning Malay affairs" (emphasis added) (Milner, p. 12).

Comment: Swettenham's statement is not always true. The Malay Rulers in the FMS came out to support Guillemard's and Clementi's decentralisation policy in public, while those of Johore and Kedah openly campaigned against Clementi. In 1939 Sultan Ibrahim of Johore also publicly protested against

the Malayanisation policy of the colonial government.¹⁸ When it suits him, Milner not only uncritically accepts Swettenham's statement at face value, but also extends the Rulers' "silence" to the colonial records. If he has read my book carefully he would have noticed that on more than twenty occasions the Malay Rulers expressed their views on the centralisation/decentralisation question, or were reported to have done so. My entire discussion of the Iskandar visit to London is based on the colonial records. If these records are silent on the Rulers' views and roles, where do I obtain data for my discussions? I can assure Milner that I do not pluck my data from thin air.

- 4) **Error:** "In 1922 (Iskandar) was reported by his Resident to be in favour of most departments of government having their heads not in Kuala Lumpur but in the individual Malay states," (Milner, p. 13).

Comment: Milner has cited me wrongly again. What I have written is that Iskandar reportedly wanted the Federal Heads of departments to become "inspecting and advisory officers", while "the State Heads" assumed responsibility "for the Departments within the State", (Yeo, p. 123).

- 5) **Error:** "Emerson was a pioneer and extremely influential but he did not have the advantage of access to the British colonial archives ... It was only after the Second World War that the archival documentation of colonial rule was investigated" (Milner, pp. 3-4).

Comment: The above does not concern my book but it is a surprising statement indeed to have come from an author of a historiographical article on British Malayan studies. Emerson did consult part of the colonial records for nineteenth-century Malaya. More important, L.A. Mills' *British Malaya*, a major British Malayan study published in 1925, which is not mentioned in Milner's paper, is based on data gleaned from the Straits Settlements archival records.

Distortion, Misrepresentation and Suppression of Data

Another common reading technique of Milner shows that he only selects data from my decentralisation study that harmonize or can be distorted to harmonize with his own ideas. The aim has always been to convey the impression that I always trace political change to the British themselves, and that I attach little importance to the Malay rulers and Malays, thereby presenting a monolithic British power in Malaya. The most important example of this is Milner's distortion of my analysis of Iskandar's visit to Whitehall. As discussed earlier, he lifts two statements from my nine-page account of the visit, blows them out of all proportion, and then concludes that I assign little significance to Iskandar¹⁹ and trace the new decentralisation policy of 1924 to the British.

Accusing me of having presented the British perspective most powerfully, Milner writes:

The colonial ruler dominated all that lay beneath them. By the 1920s, Yeo proclaims the British had 'acquired effective' control

and direction of every state and settlement in Malaya" (emphasis added) (Milner, p. 6).

The first sentence is Milner's (not mine), which is meant to impart the idea of a British monolithic power in Malaya. The second is the last sentence of my introductory chapter in which I discuss how the British imposed colonial rule over the whole of Malaya by 1920. The term 'effective control and direction' refers to the crown-colony government in the Straits Settlements and the Emerson framework in the Malay states (which are also discussed in the chapter). As demonstrated earlier, the Emerson framework, by Milner's own criterion, was not a monolithic structure. By coupling his sentence and mine, Milner subtly distorts my views and tries to create the impression that I present a monolithic British Malayan power in my book.

In the third example Milner alleges that I assign "little credit" to Sultan Idris for the introduction of the MAS (Milner, p. 7). In my discussion (Yeo, pp. 161-2), I attribute this British move to three reasons - Malay discontent voiced by Sultan Idris, the pro-Malay campaign led by Resident Birch, and the practical factor arising from high cost and dependence on overworked British officers. I explicitly state that the practical factor was a "secondary consideration" and that the pro-Malay campaign was much more important than the Malay factor in inducing (not "forcing" as Milner alleges) the government to act. Clearly, the Malay factor was not a "secondary consideration" (otherwise, I would have stated so), and therefore, it can hardly be argued that I give Sultan Idris "little credit" for the establishment of the MAS.²⁰ Milner is, of course, entitled to disagree with my assessment of the question but has no right to misrepresent my views.

Milner reads Rex Stevenson's *Cultivators and Administrators* in the same fashion. He criticises Khasnor for not recognising Sultan Idris as the likely initiator of the Malay College. In support of his criticism, he cites Stevenson's statement that Idris was "personally responsible for the promotion of a 'Raja Class' in Perak in 1888". But Milner conveniently ignores Stevenson's major findings namely, (i) that Resident J.P. Rodger was the first to suggest "the idea of a new school" and (ii) that Treacher and especially Wilkinson played the major role in getting the school built.²¹ Clearly, Milner ignores them because they do not jell with his *kerajaan*-based hypothesis. And at the bottom of this lies Milner's assumption that Stevenson, being a British Malayan historian, is unreliable unless the latter's views chime with his own *kerajaan*-based ideas. One can see how Milner has allowed himself to be dictated to by his *kerajaan* concept.

In any case Milner plays up Stevenson's Raja-class statement and proclaims that "there is *certainly* a Perak story to be told about the establishment of the Malay College at Kuala Kangsar" (Milner, p. 14). I do not think the fragmentary evidence Milner provides supports such a categorical pronouncement. It is safe to assume that Stevenson would have offered a detailed discussion of the Sultan's role in the college's founding if data are available in the British archival records. He presents none. A re-examination of these records and a scrutiny of the Sultan's archival records (if such do exist) may well confirm the existing views or support Milner's claim. If the

latter, the evidence is most likely to come from the Sultan's archival documents. Until this archival review has been carried out, Milner is not in a position to make any categorical pronouncement on the issue, and his criticism of Khasnor's views is therefore, premature.

And this touches on a central feature of Milner's paper. Milner has not done his research, yet he has adopted the posture of an expert and frequently dismissed the findings of British Malayan history on the basis of assumptions offered as historical facts.

Assumptions Presented as Facts

Propelled by his thesis-hypothesis reference, Milner goes in search of supporting data when he reads British Malayan studies. He accords importance to fragmentary evidence from Stevenson, Swettenham, Ghosh and others which agree with or support his *kerajaan*-based views. When no evidence is discovered, he makes assumptions and presents them as facts. As mentioned earlier, Milner assumes that the formation and execution of British policy were made in the Malay court, that the Rulers and Malays were the principal actors in decentralisation and that Sultan Idris initiated the MAS.

Two other examples will be enough to illustrate my point. Milner asserts that my book presents decentralisation as "a product of British policy-making". *The list of possible motivations behind decentralisation* discussed in my book, Milner writes, "cannot concern us" (emphasis added). What does concern us is that "the rulers never enter the centre stage" until the Iskandar visit to London (Milner, p. 6).

Two comments are warranted. First, the motivations behind decentralisation are of vital concern to the reader for they provide data which he can use to assess the importance I attach to the British, the Ruler and the Malays. In a detailed analysis (Yeo, pp. 64-71), I discuss the interaction between Malay discontent and British postwar nervousness as one of the two principal motivations behind the introduction of decentralisation in 1920. I have therefore, given adequate cognizance to the importance of the Malay factor (both the Rulers and the *ra'ayat*) to this major British policy. Milner suppresses this point because it contradicts his thesis that I regard the Rulers and Malays as of nominal relevance to decentralisation. Second, the reader's attention is instead directed to the fact that in my book the Rulers "never enter the centre stage" in decentralisation until 1924. Here, Milner is *assuming* that the Rulers did play the central role, and then uses this assumption to attack my account.

Milner's assumption is not supported by the archival and other documents. There is no reason whatsoever to believe that British officials deliberately refused to record fully the Rulers' views and their efforts to have decentralisation introduced in the early 1920s if the latter did indeed push hard for it then. On the contrary the Rulers' support would have immensely strengthened the endeavours of British officials to inveigle Whitehall to adopt a decentralisation policy in 1920. For this reason Maxwell cited Sultan Idris' statement of 1903 in support of his decentralisation proposal of that year. The Rulers' lack of prominence in the colonial records, I maintain, can be accepted

as evidence that they did not occupy the centre stage of decentralisation before 1924. If Milner disagrees with this, he is duty-bound to provide supporting data for his case. In his paper, he offers none.

The second example concerns the Guillemard-Maxwell power struggle. Of this struggle, Milner writes, 'Both writers (Ghosh and I) take the proconsuls too seriously. Heussler brings home the extent to which the feud .. has much in common with the infighting (in) any bureaucratic, or even academic, department' (Milner, p. 5). What precisely Milner is driving at is unclear. Is he saying that we have devoted too much attention to what was a commonplace event in the British bureaucracy? If this is his line of reasoning, he has clearly missed our main point, namely, that the power struggle had a vital effect on decentralisation in the 1920s. Heussler's views do not contradict our point. That infightings were common in the bureaucracy does not necessarily rule out our contention that the power struggle did seriously impinge on decentralisation. If Milner disagrees with our contention, he is obliged to lay bare his counter arguments and substantiate them. Characteristically he has not done so; he merely rejects our findings on the assumption that the power struggle did not significantly affect decentralisation.

I think I have offered adequate evidence in the second and third sections of this rejoinder to demonstrate that Milner is not well-versed in the political history of Malaya during its colonial phase. In particular, he has not fully understood my *Decentralisation* study and Emerson's *Malaysia*. The source of this failure in understanding is his thesis-hypothesis reference which has enslaved his reading of British Malayan studies.

PART IV: MILNER'S ALTERNATIVE

Milner's Static and Superficial Malay Polity

In his *kerajaan*-based hypothesis, Milner presents the Malay Ruler as the ceremonial head in the Malay polity in the FMS. "In terms of his traditional functions," Milner asserts, "it is surprising to see how little the Sultan's position in British Malaya had changed" (Milner, p. 12). This portrayal of the Raja is both static and superficial. It makes no allowance for the impact of colonialism, fundamentalist Islam and the forces of social change on the Malay polity. It seems to contradict what Milner writes in his *Kerajaan* book:

"During the nineteenth century Malay culture was increasingly challenged by two developments: the arrival of the West and of fundamentalist Islam. Western ideas as well as those of a purified Islam were beginning to challenge the very basis upon which the Malay style of life depended. The erosion of the Raja-based polity in the face of Western and Islamic-inspired changes may prove to be the dominant theme of twentieth-century Malay history".²²

Indeed, by the inter-war years, vital changes had occurred in both the Ruler's traditional functions²³ and in other areas of Malay life.²⁴ Milner's Malay polity, a pale reflection of the political reality in the federated states, cannot therefore, be adopted to challenge the Emerson framework or be effectively used as a conceptual grid for a *kerajaan*-based study of decentralisation. For a

conceptual grid to be sound and reliable, it must be firmly anchored in the Malay polity of twentieth-century FMS.

Milner's Speculative Account of Iskandar's Visit to London

On the matter of details, it should be noted that the existing British Malayan studies have presented more data than Milner's paper on the Rulers' protest against administrative centralisation in the FMS before 1920. More important, Milner's outline reflects a central weakness of his paper, namely the strong tendency to turn assumptions into actual historical facts. Milner states that the Anglo-Kedah Treaty of 1023 "had a profound effect on Sultan Iskandar" and that "this treaty was much on Iskandar's mind when he visited London" (Milner, p. 13). I have not come across a single shred of evidence in the archival and other documents to substantiate his *categorical* statements and am sufficiently confident to assert that he is again making an assumption which, as usual, is put forth as a fact. And from this "fact" he draws the conclusion that "it *may* therefore have been the Kedah treaty which was the proximate cause of Iskandar's mission to London" (Milner, p. 13 my emphasis).

I am inclined to the view that the Anglo-Kedah Treaty did not have such a serious impact on Iskandar. It should first be noted that the treaty, which assured the Ruler that Kedah would not be *merged* with another state without the consent of the Ruler-in-Council, was not as far-reaching as it appears. The Sultan of Johore already enjoyed a somewhat similar "territorial guarantee" under the Johore Constitution of 1895 and Trengganu presumably was in the same position since her constitution was based on that of Johore (Emerson, p. 204; Yeo, p. 21). More germane, the official documents explicitly record that the discussion between Iskandar and Whitehall bureaucrats dealt with the decentralisation of power from the centre to the states (particularly Perak). Not a word or even a hint exists in the archival or other documents to indicate that the Kedah treaty was ever raised in Iskandar's correspondence or private conversations with Whitehall officials or anyone else.

Most importantly, during the FMS Rulers' Durbar in 1927 Sultan Iskandar openly voiced support for the formation of a federation of *all* the Malay states; he was to reiterate this during other durbars in the early 1930s. There is no reason for doubting the sincerity of his views. After all, he also explicitly opposed the idea of a merger between the Malay states and the Straits Settlements on the grounds that it would eventually lead to the loss of the sovereignty of the Malay states (Yeo, pp. 328-9). The point to note is that as he was prepared to see Perak join a Malayan federation, he could not have been profoundly affected by the Anglo-Kedah Treaty as Milner claims. This section of Milner's outline is an example of the speculative history of the extreme kind mentioned earlier.

Milner's Malay Principal Actors

In Milner's hypothesis the Malay Rulers would be shifted to the centre stage of decentralisation and Malay employment. "Decentralisation would be seen to flow," Milner writes, "not so much from changes in the official mind of British colonialism - though these may be admitted to have played a role - but

from anxieties and strategies developing in the Malay community" (Milner, p. 14).²⁵ And in the training and promoting of Malay administrators, Milner adds, Sultan Idris would be seen as the real initiator of the Malay College and the MAS. What has been missed is that motivation was not the only central component of British policy and administration. Equally important are the formulation and implementation of policy and administrative schemes. In fact, Khasnor's book and mine devote the larger part of our discussions to these two central components of British policy and administration. This, I feel, may well be the main bugbear to the effective execution of Milner's ideas. It is a historical fact that the Rulers were generally kept out of the alien official machine in the FMS and therefore, had a very slim chance of playing an active role in policy formulation and execution and in administrative re-structuring and organisation. Until Milner is able to successfully demonstrate that the Rulers and Malay elite played major roles in all the three spheres of decentralisation and Malay employment, they can hardly be presented as *the* principal actors on the centre stage.

One thing seems certain however. It may be feasible to produce a study in which decentralisation and Malay employment are perceived through the eyes of the Rulers and Malays. Such a study, in my view, would be very valuable as it would cast much new light on Malay perceptions and experiences of a central British policy. But this is not what Milner has in mind, for in this study the British may generally still remain as the principal players in decentralisation and Malay employment. Milner's objective is to have the Rulers and their subjects supplant the British as the principal actors on the stage, thereby transforming the British lion into a toothless bulldog ahead of time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, two major points deserve attention. First, it should be stressed that a historian should scrupulously observe the basic tenets of historical scholarship. It cannot be overemphasised that good history cannot be written by a historian who frequently ignores these tenets even if he adopts the most up-to-date sociological paradigms for his work, covers a large variety of western and non-western sources, and reads the colonial records "against the grain" in the manner Milner advocates. I think I have adequately demonstrated that Milner has gone "against the grain" of these tenets in his paper. One can only hope that he will not commit the same transgression should he embark on his *kerajaan*-based study on decentralisation and Malay employment.

Second, Milner has not in the least substantiated his general thesis that British Malayan historians are captives of the colonial records and write essentially bad history. The truth is that Milner has not done his research, or even fully digested the existing British Malayan studies as I have demonstrated earlier. Yet, regrettably, he feels sufficiently qualified to dismiss the major findings of British Malayan studies - some of which (such as Emerson's *Malaysia*) are recognised classics in Malayan historiography - with an air of finality. And it is this that marks out "Colonial Records History: British Malaya" as a rather pretentious paper. If Milner is to write a good *kerajaan*-based book on decentralisation he has to get down to the difficult task of long and laborious research and engage less in empty theorising and pontificating.

Notes

¹A.C. Milner, "Colonial Records History: British Malaya," *Kajian Malaysia*, vol. 14, no. 2, December 1986, p. 3. Henceforth, references to this article will be cited in the text.

²Yeo Kim Wah, *Political Development in Singapore, 1945-55*, Singapore, 1973.

³For discussion, see R. Emerson, *Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur, Reprint, 1964, ch. v; also Yeo Kim Wah, *The Politics of Decentralisation: Colonial Controversy in Malaya, 1920-1929*, Kuala Lumpur, 1982. Henceforth, these two studies will be cited in the text.

⁴Dom Moraes, "The Quiet Leader," *Asia Magazine* 10 Oct. 1971, p. 4.

⁵Khasnor Johan, *The Emergence of the Modern Malay Administration Elite*, Singapore, 1984, ch. 10.

⁶For discussion of the annexation question, see Emily Sadka, *The Protected Malay States, 1874-1895*, Kuala Lumpur, 1968, pp. 91-7. For Wilson's statement, see R. Emerson, p. 210.

⁷Yeo Kim Wah, "British Policy towards the Malays in the Federated Malay States," PhD thesis, Australian National University, 1972, p. 68; R. Emerson, p. 54.

⁸For discussion, see Albert Lau, "The Politics of Union and Citizenship: The Evolution of British Constitutional Policy towards Malaya and Singapore, 1942-48," PhD Thesis, University of London, 1986, ch. 1.

⁹Yeo Kim Wah, "The Selangor Succession Dispute, 1933-38," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. II, No. 2, Sept. 1971, p. 174.

¹⁰For discussion, see Sharom Ahmat, *Tradition and Change in a Malay State: A Study of the Economic and Political Development of Kedah, 1878-1923*, JMBRAS Monograph no. 12, 1984, chs. V-VI.

¹¹Emily Sadka, pp. 301-10 and E. Chew, "Frank Swettenham and Yap Ah Loy", *JMBRAS*, vol. LVII, Pt I (1984), pp. 70-87.

¹²For discussion, see C.D. Cowan, *Nineteenth-Century Malaya: The Origins of British Political Control*, London, 1961.

¹³For discussion, see Albert Lau, chs VII-VIII; J. de V. Allen, *The Malayan Union*, New Haven, 1967.

¹⁴Yeo Kim Wah, "The Communist Challenge in the Malayan Labour Scene, September 1936 - March 1937," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (JMBRAS) Vol XLIX, Pt 2, December 1976, pp. 37, 69-79.

¹⁵This view is based on two points. First, at the end of the minute recording the impact of Iskandar's visit and his advice that Maxwell be retired, Collins referred to his 1920 decentralisation proposal as follows: "I tried in my second minute on 51135/20 to make progress with definite suggestions, but the matter was put aside. I would again be willing to make suggestions ...". Here Collins was mildly chiding his superiors for not accepting his ideas in 1920 and implying that otherwise, the undesirable position in the FMS could have been avoided. Second, Collins attempted to sugar his own scheme for acceptance by describing Iskandar's proposal as "moderate". Coming from a relatively conservative official, this was surprising, for the proposal was anything but moderate. Perhaps, we should also note that Collings' manoeuvre did not really downgrade the significance of Iskandar's visit. This was so because his scheme was similar to that of Iskandar, and his move benefitted the interests of both parties.

¹⁶My summary of Roff's views on these issues is based on W. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, Kuala Lumpur, 1967, pp. 1-31, 91-125, 197-203, 235-6, 248-51.

¹⁷I have already written a review article on Ghosh's book in 1982 and do not wish to revive old issues, unless necessary to do so. I therefore, do not wish to respond to many comments Milner makes on Ghosh's views on decentralisation and Malay employment.

¹⁹The most extreme examples of misrepresentation are found in footnote (53) in which Milner cites a sentence from a section of my book and a word from another section and concludes that I have a "colonial mentality". This allegation is so obviously untrue that it does not, I think, deserve a response.

²⁰For a fuller account of my views on the Malay factor behind the introduction of the MAS, see Yeo Kim Wah, "The Grooming of an Elite: Malay Administrators in the Federated Malay States, 1903-1941," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. XI, no. 2, September 1980, pp. 318-9.

²¹Rex Stevenson, *Cultivators and Administrators: Educational Policy towards the Malays, 1875-1906*, Kuala Lumpur, 1975, pp. 169, 177-8.

²²A.C. Milner, *Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule*, Tucson, 1982, pp. 12 and 114-5.

²³For instance, by controlling succession to the throne, the British now determined the personality who should be permitted to perform "ceremony" in a Malay polity. Again, while the ruler remained as the formal head of Islam in his state, this position had undergone a sea change in terms of the enormous increase in power and of the utilisation of western administrative forms and techniques for the organisation of the ulamas, the running of the mosque and the institutionisation of Malay religious life. For discussion see W. Roff, pp. 67-74. And while the Ruler continued to appoint Penghulus, the decision for such appointments, once made by himself or his nobles, was now taken over by the Resident of the state. Finally, while unsophisticated Malays might still believe that little had changed in the Malay court, as Milner asserts, the politically-conscious Malays certainly perceived changes and grasped their significance. For instance, Khasnor Johan narrates how certain MAS officers declined to attend the obeisance ceremony at court presumably because of their resentment against the British representatives for their privilege to sit on chairs, while the Malays sat on the floor during the occasion. (Khasnor Johan, p. 173). See also Tun Abdul Razak's observations during the Sultan of Pahang's coronation in 1932 cited earlier.

²⁴Milner's account also does not reflect the power situation in the FMS. His *kerajaan* book depicts the Raja as a ruler whose function was the performance of ceremony and the awarding of titles and honours to deserving subjects in a traditional Malay state. Even if this is an accurate description of the Raja's role, the question as to who controlled the actual government of the state remains unanswered. In Milner's *kerajaan* no one carried out executive, judicial and other functions and the Malay polity ran all on its own - an oriental exoticism that would no doubt fascinate the western reader. Studies by Leonard Andaya, Shaharil Talib, Sharom Ahmat, Khoo Kay Kim and others establish that the wielding of financial, administrative, judicial and other powers was a political reality in a traditional Malay state. This question in Perak, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan before 1874 is discussed in J.M. Gullick's *Indigenous Political System in Western Malaya* which, Professor Joel Kahn of Monash University believes, "must now be considered a classic" in the study of pre-colonial state systems. After 1874 the British deprived the traditional Malay elite of these powers and governed the federated states themselves through an alien political system. This confirms the Emerson framework and represents a major change in the character of the Malay polity in the FMS. See Leonard Y. Andaya, "The Structure of Power in Seventeenth Century Johore", in Anthony Reid and Lance Castle (ed.), *Pre-Colonial State Systems in Southeast Asia*, JMBRAS Monograph no. 6, April 1979, pp. 1-11; Shaharil Talib, *After Its Own Image: The Trengganu Experience, 1881-1941*, Singapore, 1984, pp. 9-36; Sharom Ahmat, pp. 75-88; Khoo Kay Kim, *The Western Malay States, 1850-1873*, Kuala Lumpur, 1972, pp. 1-30; W. Roff, pp. 1-31; Joel Kahn's and Paul Kratoska's review article on Patrick Sullivan, "Social Relations of Dependence in a Malay State: Nineteenth Century Perak", *Kajian Malaysia*, vol. II, no. 1, June 1984, p. 109. Another important change was that under the influence of modernisation and other forces, the Malay ruling class were no longer satisfied with a Ruler whose chief function was the preserving and performing of ceremony. Hence, the FMS Rulers envied their brother Sultans in the UMS for enjoying a larger degree of autonomy and power and desired to eventually possess the same. Their aspiration was openly echoed by politically-conscious Malays in Malay newspapers (Yeo, pp. 65-66). This constituted a major motivation behind the Rulers' support for decentralisation and Malay employment. If the position of the Sultans in the FMS had changed little in terms of his traditional functions (which must include

"ceremony", "the substance of the state"), then why should the Rulers press for decentralisation and Malay employment at all?

²⁵It is interesting to note that Milner intends also to examine the Malay ra'ayat's role in decentralisation. Yet when I discuss the views of various sections of the Malay community on decentralisation and Malay employment in the early 1920s (Yeo, pp. 64-71), Milner writes that these views "cannot concern us".